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ABSTRACT

A biographical sketch of Robert Michels (1876-1936), a political sociologist and economist who taught in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States is presented. In his best known work, "Political Parties: A Sociological Study of Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy," he put forth his "iron law of oligarchy" which purported to explain how political parties inevitably become undemocratic and elitist. A reference list includes Michels's writings, books in which Michels's ideas are mentioned, and biographical sketches. (DB)

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Robert Michels (1876-1936), Political Sociologist and Economist

By Franklin Parker

Robert Michels (Jan. 9, 1876-May 3, 1936) was a political sociologist and economist who taught in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States. His "iron law of oligarchy" theory explained how democratic political parties inevitably become undemocratic and elitist. He was born in Cologne, Germany.

Michels's fairly well off family, of German, Flemish, and French origin, enabled him to travel and study in England, at the Sorbonne in Paris, at German universities in Munich, Leipzig (1897), and Halle (1898), and in Turin, Italy. He became a socialist, a member of the German Social Democratic Party, and a syndicalist committed to workers ruling the state. Because of government opposition to his political views, he was not able to secure an academic position in Germany. He taught economics, political science, and sociology at the University of Turin (1907-14). There under the influence of Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) he became disenchanted with social democracy. In 1911 he published his best known book, Political Parties: A Sociological Study of Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy.

Robert Michels became an Italian citizen in 1913. He was Professor of Economics at the University of Basel, Switzerland (1915-26). In 1927 he was invited to the University of Chicago, U.S.A., where he taught political sociology and economics. He also lectured that year at the Institute of Politics, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. After Benito Mussolini came to power, Michels returned to Italy, joined the Fascist Party, and was a Professor of Economics and the History of Doctrines, University of Perugia (1926-36).

In Italy he was known as and wrote under the name Roberto Michels. He occasionally lectured in Rome, where he died on May 3, 1936. Married, he was survived by a daughter, Mrs. Mario Einaudi, wife of a Harvard University professor.

Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" theory in his book, Political Parties, held that democratic parties have built-in characteristics that inevitably lead to rule by a dominant few. The book's purpose was to explain how parties of the left, particularly the pre-World War I German Social Democratic Party, become deradicalized. To organize and maintain a mass movement, its leaders must create a permanent bureaucracy with officials. These officials soon become divorced from their worker origins, strive for power, and adopt the style and outlook of the established class. Their radicalism becomes blunted and they oppose whatever threatens their organization's continuity and their own privileges. The more devoted and zealous a bureaucracy is to its cause, wrote Michels, "the more also will it show itself to be petty, narrow, rigid, and illiberal." Organizations which begin as democracies inevitably adopt an aristocratic form against which at the outset they struggled. Reformers arise but even they soon fuse with the old dominant class.

Of the pre-World War I German Social Democratic Party Michel wrote, "Socialists [Democrats] can be victorious, but Socialism [Democracy] never." On the inevitability of his "iron law of oligarchy," he concluded, "this cruel game will continue without end." Like his fellow Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Michels, a disillusioned socialist, ended as a defender of fascist social thought before the rise of Mussolini and Hitler.

References

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